

Teaching a Foreign Language Online

Mansi Bajaj

University of Texas, Austin- USA

mansibajaj.088@gmail.com

Abstract

The methodologies for language teaching have evolved over the years to learner centered and inclusive pedagogies. The focus has been on interactive communicative and task-based teaching methodologies. With the class moving online, there is a need to develop new activities and creative tasks to engage learners in foreign language environment. The present paper highlights the need for language teachers to take the role of facilitator and engage learners in online-based activities and tasks. The paper also lists some online-based tasks and activities which can generate noticeably greater desire to learn the language and eventually, higher comprehensible language output. Employing a wide range of collaborative project-based tasks gives learners opportunity to develop their vocabulary to express varied concepts, handle authentic language input and gradually the language creeps into learner's daily life without an intentional effort. A continuous and enthusiastic support of the teacher is imperative for generating greater interest in learners and for accomplishing these objectives.

Introduction

Language classes are considered to be some of the most interesting classes in school and college. They involve a lot of conversations, discussions, role enactment, games, activities, etc. Some believe that delivering language classes online can be mundane due to which students could lose interest. If one attempts to move their in-person language class module to online mode, it completely defeats the purpose and undermines the beauty of online classes. One needs to accept that online classes are not better or worse than in-person classes, they are just different (Gacs, et al., 2020). It requires a different approach to be effective. The current paper will discuss the approach to make online classes more effective, and suggest some task-based activities to help generate student interest in learning and using the target language. This usage of the language in a comprehensive manner leads to language acquisition.

The present paper proposes that the online language classes can be very enriching and provide students with opportunities to utilize the target language meaningfully. Communicative classes have the potential to create a desire to learn and use target language. The present paper will highlight some engaging communicative task-based activities that facilitate productive interactions, thus comprehensible language output. These activities use authentic content as language input to develop vocabulary of varied concepts without an intentional effort.

Approach towards online language class

The latest teaching methodologies keep learners at the center of the lesson. Inclusive pedagogy appreciates what every learner brings to the class. In a language class, learners come with varied interests and goals to use language in diverse professional contexts. Adopting inclusive pedagogy in a language class ensures that the classes cater to

their interests and they can acquire the language and appropriate vocabulary to meet their specific goals. This requires introducing learners to language inputs on different themes which provides them opportunities to create comprehensible language output. This engages the learners and urges them to use the target language authentically for real-life communication. This in turn allows the learner to express themselves on the themes and have meaning-focused interactions. Expression can be in the form of narrating their personal experiences or sharing their outlook on an issue. It gives them the liberty to express themselves freely, thus developing linguistic competence. This approach is motivating for learners as the themes are personal, relatable, relevant and meaningful to them. It prepares them for their future interactions. Therefore, this approach puts learners, language and communication at the center which is “predominant” for language learning (Meskill, et al., 2020). Drills that control language output do not serve the same purpose as they are focused mainly towards using a set vocabulary or kind of phrase/ sentence structure, thus limiting a creative use of language. These drills might provide a comfortable environment and the feeling of accomplishment initially to the learner. In the long term, these encourage rote-learning due to its mechanical and repetitive nature, and discourage innovation. Such drills can be very uninteresting and demotivating for the learners (Wingate, 2018). Any drill which aims at eliciting a controlled output encourages memorization and discourages innovation.

The best way to acquire a language is by engagement in the target language. The approach to online language class should be to maximize learners’ self-reliance and participation in using the language for communicative purposes. The most important step in planning for online classes and choosing the appropriate tools requires language instructors to engage in some research, survey students to understand their interests and collaborate with the

students. Students live in a digital environment, and spend a lot of time on social media. Digital world has a lot authentic language input which can be a very effective tool in generating discussions, role plays, podcast etc. The language input, needs to challenge their understanding and perspectives on issues that are relevant to them. Using authentic materials by different digital content-creators for language input introduces them to a variety of language dialects, sentence structures and varied vocabulary. It also challenges their thoughts, which is enough to invoke student's interest and motivate them to participate in meaningful exchange of opinions and thoughts (Richards, 2006). Open-ended discussions encourage innovation and creative use of the language. This also creates a need to learn new vocabulary in a meaningful communicative context. The role of language teacher or instructor is very important here. It should be nothing more than that of a catalyst. Asking open-ended questions, inviting all thoughts and opinions and giving everyone an opportunity to express them without being judged is the best a language class can offer. Learners get a feel that the focus is on the task and not the language (González- Lloret & Ortega, 2014) and learning becomes incidental.

Task-Based language teaching is a successful way of attaining above mentioned goals in an online language class environment. It can be in the form of discussions, problem solving tasks, activities, games, etc. Students focus on achieving their goal or completing the task while using target language. Communication in the desired language is produced naturally. Students will be highly motivated to participate in culturally enriching, intellectually challenging tasks and will use the language for communicative and interaction purposes without realizing. This will also give the students a feeling of satisfaction, accomplishment and advancement.

Some online-based tasks and activities

Task based language teaching makes the classes interactive and lively, if planned well. Planning for a task-based language class requires the following:

1. **Task:** The students should be given an online task to work on. This task can be to come up with a solution to a problem in society, defining their perspectives on an important aspect of life, or a question that challenges their thoughts. The task can be something as simple as an answer to a current social scenario or recording a video of a role-play that requires the students to describe their viewpoints, beliefs and provide feedback. The students should be able to relate to the theme, it should be closely related to their lives to invoke their personal views and thoughts. The response to such questions is open-ended hence, it needs the students to create, innovate and play around with the language. Such tasks interests and motivates students, thus triggering higher student participation. It is important to integrate students at each step; hence asking students for their ideas is highly recommended. Communicative approach to classes builds a strong community, thus adding more meaning and personal touch to the classes.

The task should be well-defined and have no scope for confusion; the tasks must have clear outcomes. A good task challenges the cognitive and intellectual capability of students and provides them the right circumstance to use language productively to express themselves about topic that is applicable and significant to them.

2. **Language input:** The students should be exposed to a possible solution to the task. This not only makes the students feel more comfortable in the environment of using a foreign language, but

also provides an opportunity to build on receptive language comprehension. The language input may require reading or listening comprehension. The language inputs that require multimodality are highly appreciated. The quality of language input is more important than its quantity. Students find short films, movies and short videos on social media very relatable and gripping. Hence, these serve as substantial language inputs to set the grounds for self-directed and unrestrained discourse.

It is imperative that the language input is authentic and intellectually challenging for the students. If the language input doesn't challenge the perspective and viewpoint of students, the motivation levels will be very low. Moreover, the discussion will not generate innovative and creative language use.

3. **Language output:** In the process of doing the task or solving the problem, the students will indulge in a meaning focused discourse. An open-ended communication encourages learner-initiated discourses and leads to proactive independent learning learner autonomy, as the usage of language is not controlled or restricted to a designated grammar concept or vocabulary list. It helps the students take charge of their learning and self-direct themselves.
4. **Role as a facilitator:** The role of the language teacher/ instructor is of prominence. They must facilitate the task and create a comfortable environment where the students can speak without feeling judged. This is especially important in an online class.
5. The kind of questions asked by the teacher severely affects student attitude towards the task. Since all student interactions require creative and innovative language production, one must have high tolerance to accept errors. Focusing on grammatical form and linguistic correctness can be very demotivating in online classes.
6. **Feedback:** Constructive feedback is essential for leading students toward the right direction. Grades should not be

assigned on the basis of linguistic form and correctness; instead it should be assigned on the basis of their language growth, class participation and effort.

Let's look at some task that were assigned to Second-Year Hindi students:

1. The world is suffering from a pandemic and everyone is living with some or the other kind of stress. This made stress a relevant topic of discussion in the class. After an initial discussion on the topic, the class watched a movie in target language as homework. This proved to be a good language input in the form of listening comprehension and generated good discourse on different aspects of the movie. The students had different perspectives on certain issues giving rise to debates, counter arguments and negotiations. For their mid-term project, students were asked to make a podcast on 'how to deal with stress'. The first part of the project required students to write the podcast script and get feedback from the instructor. The second part of the project needed the students to work on the feedback and record their podcasts. All students came up with genuine solutions or ways of dealing with stress on the basis of their personal experiences. This challenged them and necessitated learner autonomy. The last part of the project required the students to listen to the podcast of any two other students of the class and write a short review on their podcast. The last step was added to give them different perspectives on approaching the task.

The grading was done for timely submission of the written script and podcast, incorporating the feedback by the instructor and giving reviews on podcasts of two other students. Therefore, grading had no penalty for linguistic error. This ensured that the students did not hesitate from using language productively and expressed themselves ingeniously.

2. One topic that all students can relate to during their college life is 'love'. The class read a story on the theme which initiated a discourse on what is love. The students had different beliefs and understandings of the concept of love. For their next project, the students were asked to make a video on how they found their 'love' in life. The students could choose to show their real love stories or make up one, as per their comfort and ease. Most students chose to show a fictional love story for their video assignment.

For this project, the students were put in smaller groups to work with each other. Since, the students had different opinions, this instigated communication about what love meant to each one of them. It involved a lot of arguments, debating, exchange of ideas and analyzing. After all the negotiations, the students discussed the overall script for the project with each other and each person wrote down their own dialogues. The videos could be compiled in two ways. Either the group could hop on a video call and do the role play, or they all could record their part and then compile all the parts together.

The final outcome for these videos was pleasing as the students used nuances, showed different aspects of the love in one's life. This project not only led to language use, but also resulted in broadening everyone's understanding of the concept and rose everyone's acceptance of other people's opinions.

3. Due to the pandemic and closing down of dorms, many students moved back to staying at home with their parents. The students often mentioned about disagreements between their parents and them. I utilized this as an opportunity to commence a conversation on the topic. After a brief discussion on it, the students were asked to have a dialogue with their parents regarding their disagreements in the targeted language. They recorded this conversation and showed it to other students in the class. The parents of some students didn't speak the language so

those students conversed with their parents in another language. Later the student gave a report on their conversation in Hindi.

This task encouraged students to use the target language as a means to solve their real-life problem. Many students revealed that this task really helped them in building a stronger bond with their parents.

The above-mentioned online activities demonstrate that a task-based assignment which poses a challenge to the intellectual ability of the learners yields sincere chances of innovative language production and acquisition. It does require a higher tolerance of errors to achieve clear outcomes.

Conclusion

In this paper, I focus on employing communicative task-based language teaching to make online classes enriching and provide learners the opportunities to use the target language effectively. Language learning is not accomplished unless the learners are indulged in language generation creatively and innovatively. Task based language learning is a means to accomplish this goal and online classes sets the perfect platform for it. Further, choosing a meaningful task that engages learners by challenging their intellect motivates the learners to self-direct themselves in the direction of acquiring the language. This also fills a sense of achievement and fulfillment in the learners.

Online mode of instruction empowers the language classes by offering a range of opportunities to involve learners in producing the target language. Additionally, this mode of instruction also puts the language instructors in the role of facilitator of student learning. The language instructors must approach online mode with a positive spirit and avail the richness of digital world. Online mode of instructions can give

remarkable results for language classes and in the long run, completely replace in-person classes.

References

Gacs, A., et al. (2020). Planned online education versus crisis-prompted online language teaching: Lessons for the future. *Foreign Language Annals*, 53, 380–392. <https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/doi/full/10.1111/flan.12460>

González-Lloret, M. (2014). The need for needs analysis in technology-mediated TBLT. In M. González-Lloret & L. Ortega (Eds.), *Technology-mediated TBLT: Researching technology and tasks* (pp. 23–50). Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Meskill, C., et al. (2020). Teaching languages online: Professional vision in the making. *Language Learning & Technology*, 24(3), 160–175. <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/44745>

Richards, J. (2006). *Communicative language teaching today*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wingate, U. (2018). Lots of games and little challenge—a snapshot of modern foreign language teaching in English secondary schools. *The Language Learning Journal*, 46(4), 442–455.

